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SUBJECT: COMOROS: FRANCE SHARES U.S. ASSESSMENT AND
OBJECTIVES

REF: A. ANTANANARIVO 452

[1B](#). PRETORIA 1675

[1C](#). STATE 60497

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, 1.4 (b/d
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[11](#). (C) SUMMARY: MFA AF DAS-equivalent Jean-Claude Brunet on May 10 said that France shared USG views (refs A and B) on the current situation in the Comoros. The situation had calmed in the past few days, but much depended on how President Sambi now responded to Anjouan "President" Bacar's conditions. Brunet said that France generally shared U.S. objectives concerning the stability of the islands, their unity and integrity, and peaceful resolution of disputes. It was critical that upcoming elections take place peacefully and transparently. He indicated the importance of working with the IMF, World Bank, and African Development Bank (AfDB) to help the Comoros develop economically, particularly in the agricultural sector. Brunet encouraged an active U.S. role regarding the Comoros and the broader region. END SUMMARY.

[12](#). (C) MFA DAS-equivalent for Southern Africa/Indian Oceans Jean-Claude Brunet met with Embassy Africa Watchers on May 10 to discuss the situation in the Comoros (ref C). MFA deskofficer Stephane Le Brech also attended. Brunet said the GOF much appreciated the Department spokesperson's May 4 statement calling for calm and the peaceful resolution of disputes. We shared with Brunet the substance of refs A and B, noting the apparent lessening of tension over the past few days. Brunet and Le Brech said that the GOF had the same assessment of the current situation.

[13](#). (C) Brunet said that much hinged on how Sambi would respond to the "conditions" Bacar had set for his cooperation in resolving the crisis. Brunet did not speculate on what Bacar might do. Brunet suggested that the scheduling of the elections in order to avoid a long delay between the expiration of Bacar's term of office and the vote for new leadership could have been handled better. Brunet also thought that Sambi would have avoided trouble had he not named as interim Anjouan president a former head of the Assembly, whom Bacar had previously forced from office. Brunet observed that such machinations were standard fare in the Comoros; given the history of repeated coups, the level of trust among leaders was not high.

[14](#). (C) Brunet said that France and the U.S. appeared to

share similar objectives regarding the Comoros -- support for democracy, unity and territorial integrity, and peaceful resolution of disputes. Brunet indicated that the U.S. could play a very positive role and he welcomed what he believed was a relatively new U.S. presence in the islands (referring to the locally-hired staff member reporting to Embassy Antananarivo).

15. (C) Brunet stressed the importance of the upcoming elections and the need to ensure their fairness and transparency. He said that France was going to send a military logistical support unit from Reunion to assist elections observers from neighboring states who would be present for the vote. He stressed that this military unit would perform logistical support only. He indicated, however, that the French and EU were considering how best to observe and otherwise support the elections. Africa Watchers mentioned briefly the recent diplomatic note received at Embassy Paris (forwarded to the Department) in which the Comoros asked for various forms of USG elections support.

16. (C) Brunet noted the important strategic location of the Comoros and concerns that it not be allowed to become a failed state and a potential locus of criminal or terrorist activity. In that regard, he noted President Sambi's background and uncertainty about the eventual policies he might come to support -- Sambi was of Yemenite origin, had studied in Saudi Arabia (from which he was apparently expelled for reasons that remain obscure), and had finished his studies in Tehran. Given this background, Brunet said that Sambi was a bit of a cipher and warranted attention. He noted that the Anjouan island itself had a substantial Shiite population.

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17. (C) France's specific priorities centered on: (1) successful elections in June; (2) a final and effective reorganization of the islands' security forces and their structure; (3) revitalized economic development, particularly in the agricultural sector; and (4) arrangements with the IMF, World Bank, and AfDB to boost the economy. Concerning the latter issue, Brunet said that the Comoros carried an international debt of about USD 32 million, which he thought could be reduced to about USD 10 million. He indicated that France would work with the IFIs on debt reduction.

18. (C) Brunet said that France-Comoros relations were still characterized by suspicion and lack of trust on the part of the Comorans and enduring bitterness about Mayotte's perceived privileged status. Brunet stressed, however, that the "old days" (i.e., the chaotic period of coups, counter-coups, and players such as Bob Denard) were long past and that France hoped to develop balanced and positive relations. He regretted that a recent seemingly innocuous event -- a change in Mayotte's telephone area code, which Brunet said was necessary for purely technical reasons to meet the demand for more phone numbers -- had reignited Comoran suspicion of the French. He observed that despite the change in area code one could -- sometimes -- successfully make inter-island calls using the old area code. Brunet indicated that this typified the way that things often work (and do not work) in the Comoros.

19. (C) COMMENT: One of Brunet's recurring themes was his encouragement for the U.S. to take a more active and positive role in the Comoros. He said several times that the U.S. could have strong influence and that Comorans would likely pay very close attention to anything the U.S. did or said regarding the region. END COMMENT.

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